*HOT MIC!*

James 3:1-12

September 12, 2021

“Lose some weight, baby girl!”

That’s what ESPN D.C. bureau reporter Britt McHenry said to a female parking lot attendant when McHenry was trying to get her car out of the impound lot.

 When the security camera footage went viral, ESPN suspended McHenry for one week. Some felt that she should have been fired. Her verbal assault on this woman was brutal. (There was more to it than I just said.) The video shows McHenry verbally berating a woman behind the counter as she attempts to get her car out of an impound lot in Arlington, VA.

 “I’m in news, sweetheart,” says McHenry on the video. “I will f . . . sue this place.” She says before going on (and on, and on). “I wouldn’t work in a scumbag place like this,” she says. “That’s all you care about: taking people’s money. With no education, no skill set. Just wanted to clarify that. Do you feel good about your job? So I can be a college dropout and do the same thing? Maybe if I was missing some teeth they would hire me, huh? I’m in television and you’re in a f . . . trailer, honey.”

 The towing company fired back, saying they are proud of the way their employee handled the attack and that they strive to hire workers like her who can “keep their cool.” Ongoing investigations revealed that the employee may have egged Britt on. [What would that have taken, maybe an interjection of self-defense amidst the tirade?] Anyway, the tape that was released to the media was heavily edited.

 Microphones can be dangerous. Sometimes hot mics can land us in hot water. They amplify everything. Even the things we wish they wouldn’t.

 The microphone doesn’t know good singing from bad. It doesn’t know the difference between what is to be said at a press conference and a private whisper to a colleague. The microphone amplifies everything, even things we never expect to see the light of day.

 Those who wear microphones can sometimes forget this. Like the day President Obama was having a casual conversation about the video Music Awards as a video crew prepared for an interview. While chatting about the night Kanye West bizarrely interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech, someone asked why West would do that. Pres. Obama, apparently forgetting his mic was hot and that the cameras were rolling, said with a smile, “Because he’s a [crude word for a donkey].”

 When the crew cracked up laughing, the President realized how embarrassing this could be. He immediately began to ask them to “cut the President some slack.”

 While these examples make us smile, they are the exception. Many of the so-called “hot mic gaffes” that go viral contain profane, sexist, racist or combative language. They have ruined political campaigns, careers of reporters, and even strained international relations.

 While you may not spend much time near a microphone, all of us have experienced the power of words. What we say can embarrass us, hurt us or others, and devastate some.

 At a local restaurant, you’ve been chatting with a close friend about your relationship with an annoying coworker. Suddenly you notice one of that coworker’s closest friends is seated at a nearby table. How much of our gossip did she hear?

 During a text conversation with your best friend, you vent about your spouse’s recent detachment and other shortcomings. A few minutes later, in a sudden moment of panic, you grab your phone to confirm that that text was, indeed, sent to your friend, and not your spouse!

 While chatting after worship about a recent decision by the Session with which you disagree, you notice a member of that board who appears to have been listening intently. Immediately you begin reviewing the conversation in your mind, hoping you didn’t say anything they might find insulting.

 Unlike the embarrassment of a TV commentator’s discovering what she said went public, a pastor’s bad singing, or an off-hand comment by the President, these situations can do real damage. Friendships are lost, marriages are strained, work environments are made uncomfortable, and church disputes become heated because of a careless word.

 Once leaving our lips, our words are out of our control. You can’t get toothpaste back in the tube. The bell cannot be un-rung. Our words may not “go viral,” but they may “go virus,” infecting more people than we’d care to know.

 Like a bit in a horse’s mouth, or the rudder of a ship, James teaches us that our tongues can lead us places we do not want to go. Then he reminds us that the damage can be far more catastrophic. As a tiny fire can grow out of control and destroy everything around it, so, too, can a careless word wreak havoc upon relationships and reputations.

 James’s message in our text, then, is nothing more than a call to choose between words that hurt or words that heal.

 Larry David, co-creator of the iconic television show *Seinfeld*, and star and creator of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, once attended a baseball game at Yankee Stadium. When they put his face up on the big screen, the crowd spontaneously stood and cheered for the hometown Brooklyn boy.

 Later that night, as he and his friends were exiting the stadium, things changed. Someone yelled from a passing car that David was terrible. (“Larry, you s..ck” was the quote). His friends say that the accolades of 50,000 cheering fans paled in comparison to one loose tongue. The rest of the night, all David could think about was the one who did not like him.

 While Larry David is rather famously neurotic, you get the idea. The power of negative words is enormous. We know this all too well. Despite all our accomplishments in adulthood, a parent’s careless words spoken more than 50 years ago still sting. The uninformed opinion of a teacher still affects your decisions even though you have a successful career. Although others have told you how gifted you are, a bad performance review – formal or informal – still echoes years later. Those words are amplified in our hearts without the aid of a microphone.

 In an honest moment, we would also confess that *we’ve done the same to others*. (Examples:) An out-of-control moment with our children; those times we said something we know would push our spouse right over the edge; the mean words we said to a friend under the guise of ‘honesty.’ But, like a viral video of a hot mic gaffe or a small flame that grows into a raging fire, our words once spoken are out of our control. The damage can be devastating.

 Fortunately, our words can also be used to bless, as James notes. They can be used to bring healing to injured souls. Every word we speak falls into one of three categories: Emotionally hurtful, emotionally neutral, or emotionally healing. Because we use language to report or pass on information, most of our speech falls into the “emotionally neutral” category. Where would we place the bulk of the other words we speak? Emotionally hurtful, or emotionally healing? Some might try to dismiss James’ warnings about the use of our words by noting he directs this admonition specifically to teachers. While we may not consider ourselves teachers, there are times when our words carry that kind of authority. But as a parent, a mentor, a supervisor or role model, we do have a teaching role, too.

James might be saying that, if the principle of conversational discretion applies to the general population, it applies even more so to the teaching class. If we expect those outside of the teaching profession to use their words wisely, then teachers themselves must be absolutely above reproach in terms of their speech, and subjects spoken about.

Towards the end of this passage, James shifts metaphors to illustrate that our words tell the world something about our hearts. Like the fruit tells us about the tree, and the water downstream tells us about the source, our words say something about us. When we have assumed a teaching role, our words not only represent us, but our whole group, which sometimes is all of Christianity. Before posting, sharing, tweeting, or chatting, you and I need to measure our words to be sure we are representing Christ well.

As our words have power to destroy, they also have the power to strengthen, encourage, and affirm those whom we love. While Larry David may have missed the accolades of a faceless crowd of 50,000, the right words from the right person kept him off the ledge, so to speak, and the right words from the right person can do amazing things for us. The words of a parent who reminded us we are still loved after getting dumped by our first boyfriend or girlfriend are remembered. The words of a mentor encouraging us to take that next step because they see our talent and ability, still prod us along. The words “I love you” from the lips of our spouse still have the ability to make our day.

As the people of God, you and I are called to be those people for someone else.

When we come together on a Sunday morning to praise God, to unite our voices in prayer, and together profess our faith through creeds and affirmations, we are using our tongues in service to God.

After worship, during the week, maybe, when we encourage one another in a committee meeting, tell our story to someone in our small group of people who can learn from our mistakes, or pause to pray with a friend who is struggling, we are, in the words of James, sharing a blessing. But it doesn’t stop there.
When we compliment the work of someone we supervise at the office, when we offer a word of encouragement to *someone who us supervising us*, when we leave a note of appreciation for our waiter at the restaurant, when we compliment the kids in our church or neighborhood – when we do this, we are living our calling, yes? Our tongues are powerful tools. So we have to use our words wisely.

Hot microphones can be awfully embarrassing when they amplify the wrong things, but never a problem when we’re building others up and blessing God. So let’s you and I always speak in such a way that we never fear a hot mic, a nosey neighbor, or an errant text.

“Watch your mouth!” says James. Good advice.

Amen.